"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Civilization.*"

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Underprivileged Farm Families and the Christian Conscience

By R. W. Hudgens*

Brush Mountain hunched up from the valley in a rising wave of "saddle back" foothills. Big Joe lived right at the top. He had the most beautiful view and the most squalid house for miles around in that lovely, and poverty-stricken, Appalachian County.

Big Joe and his large, sickly family were such well-known "poor folks" that they actually became a symbol. To some, they were a symbol of shiftless people, no-accounts.....to others, a symbol of disinherited people who never had a chance. The good women of the nearby town never forgot Joe at Thanksgiving and Christmas. Invariably their church societies sent him a basket of food. The ladies got a warm sense of satisfaction from these efforts. Really kindhearted, they never realized how superficial was their help against the deep-rooted history of Big Joe's poverty, and gradually, through the years, they came to be disillusioned because he "did not make something of himself."

The young man who told me this story became disillusioned, too. But not about Joe. He was distressed because his townsmen were satisfied with extending seasonal fellowship instead of making an honest and sustained effort to find out the real cause of the trouble and to support an effort to right it.

Speaking only as an interested layman and not as an authority, it seems to me that most people today no longer are stirred by a religion which is primarily concerned with personal salvation. The humanitarian impulse is strong. It has found its way into myriad secular movements and it has been implemented by Government programs. It is a fundamental religious need. The church which would hold the allegiance of its membership must be aware of its responsibilities not only in helping poor people to help themselves, but also in promoting a world marked by freedom from want. There is no place in a Christian world for privation, sickness, exploitation. There is no place for what the sociologists call "social distance"--or the assumption of nice people that our society is some kind of an exclusive club with a restricted membership.

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In the November 1927 issue of The Christian Rural Fellowship Bulletin, Arthur Raper told of a young minister who was asked what his church was doing "for the people who wear overalls."

"You know," this minister replied, "a most interesting thing happened the other day. As I was going down the road with my leading rural layman, I suggested that we have a series of revival services. 'No,' he said, 'we don't need any; all the people here are in the church.' 'But,' I said, 'how about those white men in overalls back up there at the last house?' He closed the conversation with, 'Those are just croppers.'"

Thousands and thousands of our rural people are regarded, like the field workers, as "just croppers," or, like Big Joe and his family, as "no-accounts." Some of them are sharecroppers, some are day laborers. Others are cash-paying tenants, or owners of small farms.

We see them along the roadsides as we pass. We see their disgraceful housing conditions and the malnourished bodies of their children. We see the haunted faces of men and women, old in middle age. We see these and other signs of distress. What most of us don't see are the invisible chains that bind these people to a life of poverty.

If we looked hard enough, we would see impoverished land out there beyond the impoverished people--250,000,000 acres of it washed and gullied to the point of complete ruin, another 775,000,000 acres badly damaged. Beyond the ramshackle houses is a whole mass of people on land that belongs to someone else--42 per cent of all farm families were tenants in 1935, tilling the soil under a system that uprooted one out of three of them at the end of every year. Beyond the little 25 and 50-acre farms, are big farm factories covering thousands of acres and operated by thousands of homeless workers.

This isn't the kind of a rural life that we started out to build. Our pioneer fathers set out to build homes. They were willing to face hardships and danger to attain security for themselves and their families. They opened up frontiers, cleared the land, planted and harvested crops. And they built homes. But somewhere along the line something went wrong. Something came between the people and their land. The American system of family-owned, family-operated farms began to collapse. The background of the trouble goes back 50 years or more. Woven into the background are poor settlement laws, commercialized farming, insecure land tenure, exploitation of people as well as the soil.

These are the roots of rural poverty. And the roots must be destroyed before the poverty can be ended. Our traditional method of dealing with the problem has been to treat its victims. We know what to do for the individual. We give him food and clothing and other necessities, and try to find him better employment. Our ministers and our religious groups thus care for great numbers of the poor, and often with great sacrifices to themselves.

We have always believed in the Christian precept that we are our brother's keeper. Now we are beginning to realize that we must change the apostrophe in "brother's" and place it after the "s". We are beginning to enlarge our concept of the responsibility we have for our brothers. The conditions we are concerned about in helping the individual who has been hurt by poverty are different from the conditions which make him what he is. We have cared for the poor in much the same way that a doctor cares for his patient. We need doctors to make us well when we get sick, but we also need a Public

Health Service to keep us from getting sick. We need a charitable attitude toward the people who suffer, but we also need an attitude that will bring about the correction of conditions which make people suffer.

I don't know what heaven is like, but I imagine it is a place where right living is a perfectly normal thing. I imagine that the heavenly atmosphere is not conducive to any other kind of living. Only by correcting conditions out of which the ills of the world grow can we create an atmosphere in which right living is a normal thing. We have made a start. During the depths of the depression, this country began to face many conditions in its social and economic system that it had evaded before, and to develop techniques to cope with the problem and correct their causes.

There was no one simple remedy. There had to be credit for those who lacked security enough to get credit anywhere else. But this was not enough. There had to be help and encouragement in changing outmoded but deeply ingrained ways of farming for each individual family. And even this was not enough. Poor health, poor diets, unhealthy surroundings, debt, isolation, insecurity--all these things had added momentum to the avalanche of poverty, and all of them had to be attacked. Better leases for tenants were sought, leases that made definite provision for gardens and pasture and livestock. Plans were made for good diets, and for producing most of the food at home, and the families learned to can vegetables for year-round needs. Hundreds of families were helped to screen their houses and build sanitary outhouses. All kinds of group activities were encouraged--small cooperatives so that the families could use up-to-date machinery and good livestock; cooperatives for buying supplies and selling produce; neighborhood group meetings for the exchange of ideas and experiences, for the development of self-confidence and leadership that comes from contact with others. Some people needed medical care before they could do any hard work, and all of them needed protection against the financial ruin that follows serious sickness. And so a group health plan was worked out with the help of local doctors, enabling families to pay annual fees so that afterwards they could call a doctor when they needed one. All these efforts were a foundation upon which people could move forward to security and a useful place in society.

But for many families, it was a long, hard road, and some of them haven't made it yet. A few never will. And hundreds of thousands of others haven't been given a chance.

Even in 1939, nearly half of this country's farm families had incomes of $600 or less, including everything they sold, traded or used at home. Out of this had to come funds for farm and home supplies and farm operating expenses. Some 1,200,000 families, or about a fifth of the total, had farm incomes of $250 or less for the year.

Incomes are important only as they provide a standard of living which we choose to call American. Surely we cannot claim as American the standard of living that a rural school principal found when he went to the home of an intelligent 15-year old girl to find out why she had quit coming to school. The "home" was a small one-room house for a family of twelve. In the middle of the room was a table, in one corner a rusty stove, and around the walls were pallets on which the family slept. The teacher had found the answer. He could understand the feeling of inferiority and hopelessness that had killed initiative and ambition.

Easing its estimates on rock-bottom requirements for decent living, the National Planning Association figured that by 1940 at least 1,000,000 farm

homes urgently needed replacement. Most of these million homes now are no more than sordid and over-crowded hovels, part of a dreary and dispiriting total environment that has a controlling influence on mental and spiritual as well as physical growth.

I remember a young farmer whom I visited sometime ago. He was 29. He had a wife and two daughters, one eight years old, and the other, 18 months. His 18-acre farm was poorly cultivated and in a bad state of erosion. He was ploughing his neighbor's farm in order to borrow the neighbor's mule to plough his own farm. In other words, he was swapping his time for the mule's time. In an effort to draw him out, I discussed farm conditions, crops and prospects, as well as his ambitions. The 18-month old daughter, a pretty little blue-eyed girl, was crying and I asked what she was crying about. Her father said, "She has the thrash." "What is the thrash?" I asked. "I don't know what it is," he said, "but she has sores in her mouth." When I asked what he expected to do about it, he said, "I'm going to take her to the 'conjure' doctor." I then asked, "What will the 'conjure' doctor do for your little girl?" and he answered, "I don't know what he does--he takes her in a room and blows in her mouth--that's what we think he does--blows in her mouth."

And this is not an isolated case. Only recently a writer had this to say about a rural community near which an Army camp had been established: "The state of native culture can be gathered from the fact that many of the families do not even bother to build a privy. The whole bay is polluted with sewage. In some areas 90 per cent of the children have hookworm. Pellagra and all kinds of deficiency diseases are still common.

"Medical care consisted of a voo-doo doctor who cures asthma by mumbling over his patients, naturopaths and quacks of the most varied sorts. One man who runs a filling station is a specialist in syphilis and another cures cancer. The nearest physicians reside some twenty miles away, and the best ones are over sixty miles away."

I read this report and a few days later I read another report which might have been a sequel to the story. It was in a recent issue of the Federal Probation Quarterly: "The typical prostitute is a young woman in her early twenties, undernourished, with scanty, cheap, untidy clothing, the product of insecure and unstable rural existence." A study of 100 women near two Army camps revealed that half of the group came from farm homes, all but six of which were those of sharecroppers or tenants.

Eventually people give way under the weight of poverty. It is like a disease that saps their strength and their energy, and stifles their self-respect. Few human beings can withstand the onslaught. A well-known scientist once said: "Give me a couple, man and wife, of the well-to-do, privileged class, well nourished, well educated, and accustomed to the good things of life. Put them in an isolated, backwoods, badly eroded section; remove schools, confine them to a tenure system which makes them wanderers on the face of the earth, always in search of something better without friends, without credit, with inadequate land resources, and with very limited food supplies; and in a few generations, I will show you a family of so-called poor white trash."

If it takes a few generations to tear people down, it may take a few generations to bring some of them back. But not all. In the last few years we have seen a miracle unfold right before our eyes, the miracle of human recovery. And it didn't take any black magic to bring it about. The only kind of black magic it took was the kind one woman was talking about when she said, "I have

more heart to clean house now. It's easy to work when you've got something to work for."

"Something to work for." Bless her heart. No words could express more eloquently the human need for hope. Add two more needs--something to work with, and the ability to work--and you have the beginnings of social and economic recovery. Nothing more is needed by those who still have confidence in themselves. Nothing more was needed by the Glenn Harshbargers of Jackson County, Michigan. During the depression Glenn Harshbarger traveled through the country, doing repair work on farms, spraying orchards--doing everything he could to make a living for his wife and three children. Often he took his pay in chickens, hogs, corn and other farm products. Then he went to Detroit and got work in a garage, but he wanted to go back to farming, and as soon as he saved enough money to pay a year's rent, he and his family moved to a farm in Jackson County.

They were ambitious and industrious, and they had a reputation for fair-dealing. But they had no equipment, no cows, no chickens, no meat animals. What they needed most was credit, and they also needed technical help in planning their operations and in learning better ways of doing things. When they got this help, their big battle was won. In 1942, the Harshbargers were milking 15 cows, selling whole milk. They had a herd of 16 sheep and were marketing eggs from a nice poultry flock. A big garden furnished all the vegetables they needed. Wheat and dry beans brought in additional income. The older boy was graduated from high school in 1940 and the girl in 1942. All of them attend school affairs and go to church regularly. They plan to start buying a farm of their own this year or next.

The Harshbarger's is a story of people who needed only a chance to put their energies and abilities to constructive work, and, given that chance, were able to turn away from a roving, insecure existence and find a settled, solid place in their community.

There are hundreds of families like the Harshbargers, men and women with a sturdy independence and a faith in their own ability. But some people need more than just a chance for useful work, sometimes much more, and it isn't always easy to find the key that will open to them a better life. It may be poor health that is holding them back. Many a man has had a reputation for being shiftless when nobody on earth but a doctor could cure his "shiftlessness." What some people need most is good, nutritious food. I remember a letter that was written by a farm woman in Nebraska, the mother of four children. It was a pitiful letter. The woman told over and over how thankful she was to have two good cows. The children were so hungry for milk--it was the first milk they had had for four years--that one child "drank five glasses full for supper."

Little things can be so important to people. Community attitudes can mean so much. Human dignity is such a frail thing. Everyone of us can find ways of making our citizens feel that they belong in our community, that they are wanted in our churches and schools and at our social functions. I know that many men and women have had to regain faith in themselves and the respect of their communities before they could make any real headway against the forces of poverty. One of these was a man whom I'll call Joe Smith--a man who lives in South Dakota. He has a wife and five children, four boys and a girl. People said that Joe was better off working for someone else, that he had no ambition. People said it so often that I guess Joe himself began to believe it. He considered himself a failure. He had tried farming, and then blacksmithing and then farming again, never able to make ends meet, and the family became public charges.

There was a rural worker in the county who understood Joe's problem. He had seen discouraged people before. He got Joe and his wife interested in attending neighborhood group meetings. It was what the Smiths needed. Gradually they began to take part in the discussions and plans, gradually they regained their self confidence and changed their way of living. It took two years, but at the end of that time they had reached the place where they could get credit again. Now that family is buying a farm. Mrs. Smith has changed from a shy, retiring woman to a smiling, friendly person. And her husband? People say he is not the same Joe at all that they knew in past years. Anyone in the county would give him a fine recommendation.

Changes that have come about in the lives of people and in the life of a whole community can be glimpsed through the words of a letter that a rural school teacher by the name of Mack Thompson Turner wrote to a home management supervisor in the Farm Security Administration: "Some years ago I resolved to determine why some children in school were so dull and showed such a lack of interest in their work as compared to others. As their teacher I was greatly concerned. I was inclined to be 'hard boiled' with them and make them get it. I believed them to be purely lazy. After these methods failed I systematically analyzed each child's case. I visited his home; spent a lot of time in conversation with his parents and studied his environment. Well, after my visits were over and each child's case analyzed I came to this conclusion:

"First, I was a changed teacher. I saw what they needed was a lot of sympathy and understanding; for in their homes were found,

a. foods not sufficient for their bodies to work and grow.
b. beds not of the type to produce a rested, relaxed body the following day.
c. lights too poor for anyone's eyes.
d. clothing inadequate to keep their little bodies warm.
e. poorly heated homes.

"I could mention many other things contributing to their indifference; however, I feel that I named enough to justify the statement that I was a 'converted teacher.' One who, I hope, is sympathetic and understanding.

"Now, Mrs. Edwards, I know you are wondering the why of the above but as my school year ends and I recall the years of the research I made above I am so happy to say that we do not find the indifference and failures now as then. I firmly believe that the dawn of a new day for our underprivileged children was brought about through the F.S.A. I go to these same homes. I see the better conditions that prevail. I hear them talk of 'Mrs. Edwards' visit.' I hear them say that you told Mama 'this or that' about the garden, about canning, about their clothes. They really do look forward to your visits. You must be a real help to them.

"Here I would like to especially mention Mrs. Lucy Harris' children. Katherine, Carson, Jesse and Robert are in school. Their record is good. They compare favorably with any group in our school. They look good, feel good and do good work. Now, Mrs. Edwards, believe it or not, I was teaching in this community seventeen years ago (my first school) and that was one of the homes visited above. One of the 'little boys' of that day is now in the Army. He is just one; others I know of and taught are there also. I mention this because I feel that these boys are now fighting for you and me. I believe they are fighting to preserve the better opportunities for their little sisters and brothers.

"About the clothes, I especially notice the Barfield girls, Lorena, Annie Mae and Agnes. They are always so neat. They speak so sweetly of Mrs. Edwards' telling Mama how to sew this or to can that. Mrs. Edwards, I didn't mean to say so much in the outset but you know these are my people up here. I was a little country boy around here and we didn't have an F.S.A. (nor a Mrs. Edwards) and I am happy to see them 'get a break.' They surely are the salt of the earth."

To open opportunities that will enable society's outcasts to become dependable and contributing members of our democracy is a challenge that faces this country. The responsibility is a national one. It cannot be written off with a handshake--it requires something more than a basket of food at Thanksgiving.

A Christian world is not a world divided by a wall that separates those who are fortunate from those who are unfortunate. Only a truly democratic world can be a truly Christian world, and only in a truly Christian world can the spirit of man find its fullest powers of expression. The church has a very real responsibility in working toward the creation of an atmosphere in which there can be a realistic development of a social and economic democracy. This is the kind of a democracy on which our country was founded. We profess current faith in it, and we have made notable strides in achieving it--but we still have a long way to go.

The forces of indifference, ignorance and placidity are powerful and a constant menace. Eternal vigilance is one of the prices we pay for the right to live in a democracy. For there is a conflict of faith in this country. It is a conflict over whether the people shall have an opportunity to determine their own environment, or whether they shall live in an environment that is forced upon them. It is a fight over whether some of us are going to have a corner on democracy, or whether all of us will have equal and active opportunities to participate in the community, the Nation and the world in which we live. In fighting for democracy, we really are fighting for abundance for all people. We are fighting to put the Four Freedoms into action. For in the future our freedom must not mean freedom only for those who are capable of attaining it. It must not mean freedom only for those who are capable of speaking for themselves and for their own interests. It must not mean economic freedom only for those who have superior opportunities. Our future freedom must be factual rather than theoretical. It must mean freedom for the man who digs ditches and the man who tills the soil. It must mean freedom for every man in this country and for every man in every other country. We cannot strike a compromise for less. For such a world is the basis of all Christianity.

THE FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION - A SUMMARY OF WHAT IT DOES

The Farm Security Administration is the agency of the U. S. Department of Agriculture set up to help disadvantaged farm families make an economic and social recovery.

"Rehabilitation" loans enable families to buy livestock, seed, tools, fencing, pressure cookers or other farm and home essentials. Each family obtaining a loan also receives advice and supervision in making a farm and home plan and carrying it out. Although this credit and assistance are available only to families turned down by all other credit sources, nearly $323,000,000 had been repaid on outstanding loans of $690,000,000 on December 1, 1942. This

repayment figure includes prepayments, and amounts to 92 per cent of maturities on the loans. About 200,000 families have paid their loans in full, and about half a million families are currently being serviced with loans and supervision. In 1942, these families provided 38 per cent of the Nation's total increase in milk production as well as more than their share of increases in other war food crops.

Farm ownership loans are made in accordance with the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act. More than 31,000 farm tenants and laborers have received these long-term loans to enable them to buy farms of their own.

Cooperative loans are enabling 17,000 groups of neighboring farmers to own and use jointly farm machinery, purebred sires, and processing plants. FSA borrowers have established cooperative purchasing and marketing associations in many counties.

Local medical care plans, set up with cooperation of the organized medical profession, are bringing needed medical attention to more than 117,000 farm families in about 1,100 counties.

Other services of FSA to low-income farm families include: tenure improvement; help in providing sanitation for farm and home; loans for water facilities.

For seasonal agricultural workers, FSA operates 95 farm labor supply centers, and provides transportation for workers urgently needed in areas of farm labor shortage. It also transports year-round agricultural workers to training centers and to the farms where their services are required.

THE CRY OF THE IMPOVERISHED FARMER

By T. L. BOESCH

I have heard the cry of the impoverished farmer.

I have looked into his face, lean and clammy as the pale yellow clay he tills; I have seen through the years how man and soil have grown impoverished together.

I have watched him and his family cling to the soil like a frail vine clinging to a dead tree; the cruel blows of wind, sun and storm have not moved him; yet, out of the struggle with the years and with the soil he has nothing to add to his dream.

His heart no longer is moved by the moods of Nature, and his spirit no longer thrills at the beauty of a country landscape; he and Nature no longer commune together in a silent adoration, rather they stand together pointing an accusing finger at one another.

The houses they call homes stand out against an evening sunset as ugly and grotesque caricatures; in the dawn they stand out like ghost houses scattered about on the prairie.

Tragic and desolate is his plight, haunting and wistful is his cry; for it is a strange sight to behold a man who tills the soil cry out vengeance against the soil.

I have seen his church, stand like a haggard and worn man in a cold frosty morning, the very walls of the building seemed to cry out in strange forebodings; its unpainted spire seemed to hang its head in dejection and desolate forlornness. And I have stood in silence before its doors and asked, "Is this the house of the Eternal? Is this the refuge of the Good Shepherd? Is this the temple of hopeful men, erected and dedicated to a God o Hope?"

And my own spirit has answered me, "This house was buil with hands of love, it was dreamed in hearts of hope, bu men and the years have dealt hard with it, and the yearn ings of the hearts of the children of this house of th Lord have been blighted, and I have beheld how me and the temple have fallen together in decay."

And my spirit cried unto me, "Shall this be the plight o the church on the prairie? Shall the lonely temple o the Eternal fall in decay in the valleys and on the hills or shall men and the years awaken to their follies an pour out in a new and devoted affection their gifts an their abundance and restore to its rightful place th house of the Living God on the living prairie?"

There he stands, the impoverished farmer, surrounded b impoverished home, impoverished church and impover ished brothers. Shall the nation pass by unmindful o his plight and of his yearnings?

Let those of us who bear Christ's name lift high again th spires of His Church. Let us pour out in affection and i adoration our gifts for the lonely temples on the prairi Let us touch with beauty the walls so they will speak o hope and of courage, and with prayers and gifts sustai the "preacher of the prairie", and the impoverishe farmer and his church in decay will take courage an look up again with hope to the coming years.

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